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ABSTRACT

A study examined the visual presentation of characters on five prime time network dramas, popular with the elderly, which star elderly actors. The title sequences of each show ("Murder, She Wrote," "The Golden Girls," "Matlock," "Jake and the Fatman," and "In the Heat of the Night") were analyzed. Results indicated seven significant interrelated generalizations: the elderly characters were: (1) at the center of the shows; (2) presented as powerful members of the community; (3) affluent; (4) always healthy and physically and socially active; (5) portrayed as mentally active; (6) looked up to and admired; and (7) seen as sexy but not sensual. Findings suggest that although reverse positive stereotypes seem to be prominent, images of patriarchy and the affluent elderly still hold sway on TV. Since the America population is aging rapidly (1 out of every 6 Americans is 60 years and older) mass media scholars should questions whether the images of the elderly on television are appropriate measures of the elderly in society. (RS)

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The Elderly on Television: Changing Stereotypes

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The Elderly on Television: Changing Stereotypes

Donald G. Fowles in a recent edition of Aging remarks:

> The United States is in the midst of a revolution-- a demographic revolution that will restructure the country's population. The revolution is the aging of our population and, aside from the noisy debates about Social Security and Medicare spending, it is a relatively quiet revolution that is slowly unfolding over decades. Nevertheless, our country will undergo enormous changes as a result.

He goes on to point out that one out of every six Americans today is 60+, and by the year 2030 the number will be more than one out of every four. Today three million Americans are 85+, and by 2030 eight million people will be part of this age group. Nowadays most of us imagine the population of the United States as a kind of pyramid of lessening numbers of people as we get older, and this is essentially true, except for a "baby boom" bulge in the 25-45 age range. But by 2030 the general population will resemble a rectangle in which every five year age cohort from under 5 to 70-74 will roughly be the same, and narrowing will only begin to occur after 75 (58-59).

Since life expectancy in 1989 was 75.2 years and the median age of the American population is 32.6 (I suspect the median for the academic population is somewhat higher, but I am told academics live long and productive lives), most Americans can expect to meet the year of the rectangle. Whether we do or not, and I must admit it will take much good fortune for me to do so, we are all presently in the midst of what some have termed "the Gray Revolution" (Edelson), a revolution which I am convinced will reshape all our maps of aging.

When I was a child, I had a sense that the world was filled with young people. We played out in the streets and in the lots of Bay Ridge in Brooklyn. The noise of children was all around. People over 50 seemed very old. Nowadays the lots of Bay Ridge are all built up, but the streets are silent, and recently a local hospital was allowed to expand to accomodate the aging infirm. Bay Ridge is filled with people whose maps of aging were framed at the time mine was, in the old way, so-to-speak, as I believe most American maps are presently organized, and yet the territory of aging is changing and requires a new map, still, I believe, to be formed.

Television and Aging

At the end of his article on mass communication and aging in the second volume of the late sixties comprehensive study Aging and Society, Wilbur Schramm concludes:

> . . . it seems to us that enlightened self-interest as well as public responsibility recommend that the mass media devote some special attention, some of their very special imagination and talent, to the older audience. For . . . mass communication stands in a position of unique importance between millions of people who are trying to work out a new way of life for which there is no real precedent in history . . . (375)

Schramm is mindful that the mass media, driven by advertising's focus on younger people, have directed little attention to older people, but he believes that older people are far more active and important than the audience stereotype handed down about them indicates and that appropriate assessments of the older audience can help us know "the kind of mass communication older people really want and need, [can] give them the kind of programming and publishing they need to remain engaged rather than isolated" (374).

It is more than twenty years now since Schramm wrote these words, and in those twenty years television has surely become the paramount means of mass communication in our society. How well has television served the elderly since then? And how well is it serving them now? One way to respond to these questions is to study the images of the elderly that are presented on television and ask if they are appropriate measures of the elderly in our society? For if presentations of the elderly are inappropriate, surely the elderly are not well served.

I propose to carry out such a study in two ways. First, I will briefly review the literature of presentations of the elderly on television, and then I will look at presentations of characters on five prime time network dramas that have been popular with the elderly over the last few years--Murder, She Wrote (1984-), The Golden Girls (1985-), Matlock (1986-), Jake and the Fatman (1987-), In the Heat of the Night (1988-). As a group these were the five most popular television dramas for the 55+ audience in 1989 (Nielsen, 1989), and each of the dramas features older characters portrayed by well-known elderly actors--Angela Lansbury (65 in October 1990), Bea Arthur (68 in May 1991), Betty White (67 in January 1991), Estelle Getty (66 in July 1990), Rue McClanahan (57 in February 1991), Andy Griffith (66 in June

1991), William Conrad (70 in September 1990), and Carroll O'Connor (68 in August 1990). As measures of character presentation I will use the title sequences of each show. Each title sequence is essentially a one minute introduction to the characters, setting, and general ethos of each show and serves, I believe, as an excellent index of each show. In a sense title sequences, which remain the same show after show, year after year, type the shows and their characters.

Review of the Literature

The literature dealing with presentations of the elderly on television has been reviewed in a number of places but most notably by Richard and James Davis and by Lawrence Powell and John Williamson. Virtually all of the studies cited represent scholarly work done in the 1970s, although a few studies in the early 1980s are also included. In general we find 1) as Davis and Davis put it "the numbers of older people appearing on television do not correlate with the numbers of older people in society" (45). Older characters are significantly underrepresented. 2) Presentations are sexist. Men are far more likely to appear; they are likely to be more powerful, active, and productive. Women, when they appear, are likely to be passive and, for the most part "act as useful accoutrements to males" (Davis and Davis 47). 3) The elderly are likely to be well off and in good health, except on public service specials where they are usually seen as deprived and suffering (Davis and Davis 46-49; see also Gerbner). Finally, 4), especially on prime time programs, "the elderly tend to be shown as more comical, stubborn, eccentric, and foolish than other characters. They are more likely to be treated with disrespect" (Davis and Davis 46).

Television's image of the elderly, at least until the beginning eighties, can hardly be said to have been very flattering. In truth, what Schramm generalized about mass communication and older people ten years earlier still held true for television in the seventies--the elderly just didn't seem to count for much.

The New Golden Age

In the mid 1980s Americans began to get wind of our changing age climate. An article by Harry Waters and Jane Huck in the November 18, 1985 issue of Newsweek entitled "A New Golden Age," for example, asserts that in the past television was a medium for the young, and the old were "likely to be cast as either boorish foils or

helpless fools . . . These nights, however, prime-time entertainment has entered a true golden age. Suddenly the elderly are finding themselves portrayed as intelligent, attractive, vital--even, astonishingly enough, sexy and hip" (107). Among the shows cited as proof are The Golden Girls, The Equalizer, Murder, She Wrote, Crazy Like A Fox, and Mr. Belvedere. Waters and Huck go on to say that presumably the networks are catching up to the 1/5th of the population that will be 55+ by the end of the century and TV advertisers are more aware of this new market, especially the baby boomers who are getting older. They see Angela Lansbury's Jessica as a "potent role model for females of any socioeconomic strata" (107). And they conclude with a prediction of more shows featuring older characters in the future.

Their prediction obviously has come true, but many of the older shows have folded, as well. Still, more positive portrayals seem to be the norm, as Paula Dail concludes in her 1988 study of older Americans in the context of family life, although she is troubled by sex stereotypes that stress male dominance. She also notes: "The importance of the elderly population as a market group cannot be ignored and may account for the apparent emergence of a more positive image of them" (705). Indeed, the presence of an increasingly larger elderly market does seem to influence some programming decisions, and TV does watch the aging baby boomers closely, but programmers still follow the 18-49 market and look for good shows (Buck 32-33). And marketing executives who see the 50+ market as the next hot market are apparently ahead of creative departments (Diddlebock), a point which Linda Swayne and Alan Greco earlier implied in their study of television commercials which pointed out that elderly Americans were still underrepresented and still were not presented often enough as positive role models in situations of consumption.

To conclude, then, the picture of the elderly on television appears to be far more positive than it was ten years ago, probably because of marketing decisions to begin to incorporate the elderly into television's mainstream. But the elderly are still an incomplete presence, and significant problems of role presentation, especially gender presentation, persist.

Properties of Title Sequences

A few words about title sequences before we turn to present day images of the elderly. Title sequences generally have two significant practical (as opposed to aesthetic) functions--to display the name of the show and to identify the names of the

actors who play the principal characters, what can be called naming and credit functions. In addition, the name of the show's creator may also be displayed in the last shot, as in the case of Matlock, for example. This function does not operate in The Golden Girls or Murder, She Wrote, however.

In the five shows studied the title sequences range from roughly 40 seconds for The Golden Girls, the only half hour show studied, to 45 seconds for Murder, She Wrote, to 60 seconds for the other three one hour shows. Average shot lengths were less than 2 seconds; Matlock, for example, averaged roughly 2 seconds a shot and The Golden Girls, 1.75. The longest shot recorded was 5.33 seconds (in Murder, She Wrote) and the shortest .16 seconds (in Jake and the Fatman). Shots were timed with a stopwatch during playbacks of recordings of recent episodes of the shows.

Generally speaking, the significance of characters in a show can be measured by the number of times they appear, their total time of appearances in the title sequence, and especially by their personal credit shot which displays the name of the actor as a graphic under the image of the character, usually in a bust shot. Andy Griffith's credit shot in Matlock, with a graphic underneath "STARRING/ andy griffith," to illustrate, lasts 5.08 seconds, while Julie Sommars credit shot, with her name underneath, lasts only 3.00 seconds.

Title sequences only present visual images, usually visual images of characters or settings; one does not hear characters speak, although they may appear to be speaking. Instead one hears the show's theme song or theme music on the audio track. For each of the five shows studied, the show's theme music or song characterizes an essential quality of the show--in the case of Murder, She Wrote, The Golden Girls, and Matlock, it is a sense of jauntiness and perhaps friendliness which dominates, although there is also a touch of foreboding in the music of the shows that deal with crime; in the theme music of In the Heat of the Night, one feels a sense of steamy, troubled Southern blues, and in the theme music of Jake and the Fatman, one feels a sense of driving, rapid action, with a touch of striptease underneath. Insofar as essential qualities are captured, I think it is fair to say that a show's theme song or music frames a context within which the images of characters are presented, and by the same token the images can be said to frame a context for the music as well.

Today's Portrayals of the Elderly

Turning now to the images in the title sequences of the five shows that have been selected as indexes of presentations of the elderly today, what do we find? Eight significant interrelated generalizations can be made from them, I believe.

First, the elderly characters are at the center of the shows. In two of the title sequences--Murder, She Wrote and The Golden Girls--they are the only characters we see; in the other title sequences they are featured--from the dominant manner of Matlock, where Matlock's face is frozen on the right or left in a large number of shots, to the shared billing of Jake in Jake and the Fatman, to the lead character billing in the more ensemble In the Heat of the Night sequence. The central nature of elderly characters means that the audience can identify these shows with the elderly and look forward to the active participation of characters they are likely to empathize with and perhaps see as role models. Since all actors who perform the elderly characters have histories as performers, it is also likely that many viewers have followed them over time and feel a kinship with them and a sense that both of us, that is, the actor and the audience member, carry on.

Along with being at the center goes the concept of being powerful. The second point then is that the elderly characters are presented as powerful members of their communities. The ultimately powerful character is Jessica Fletcher of Murder, She Wrote. The title sequence leads us not only to believe that she constructs the story that is bound in the red folder during the last shot, but that she constructs her own life as well in the memory iris shots with faded and blurred white edges that are contrasted with the sharp and full writing shots. Moreover, we are lead to believe that she may be constructing our lives too, as we can infer from the shot of the typewriter keys that seem to strike the television screen, the paper of our eyes or mind, and thereby "type" us. But all of the other elderly characters are powerful also. Matlock opens with a shot of a white court house which is then digitized and sweeps us into a courtroom where a silvery Matlock commands the attention of the confederate flag and a crowd. The last shots of the show display Matlock walking down the court house steps in front of an image of Justice, and we are lead to believe that he is the very embodiment of the virtue he has just passed. The women in The Golden Girls seem to live totally in a world of their own making in their communal home, the creators of an idyllic Miami. The Fatman, Jason McCabe, walks around Honolulu as if he commands the island, and in the last shots, Jake, who has been doing all kinds of

adventurous, active work meets his fatherly boss at a statue which seems to confirm the Fatman's historical presence in Hawaii. Clearly the Fatman rules the world of Jake and the Fatman. Even in In the Heat of the Night where each character is presented in a 4.20 second blue naming shot over a night scene, Chief Bill Gillespie comes first, and he wears the signs of a leader--a cowboy hat with a badge in its center, a pair of sun-glass type glasses, and a neat uniform and tie. We expect those that follow will report to him.

Third, the elderly characters are affluent. We derive this generalization from the settings in which we meet the characters, their dress, their activities, and their roles. The Golden Girls, for example, live in a spacious, well-decorated house, and seem to have shot after shot of different fine clothing. Matlock, who in contrast to the well-clothed Golden Girls seems to have only one white-knightly suit, is clearly a lawyer with a staff and a comfortable office, and we see him in one shot drinking wine at a party. He may shine his own shoes, part of his good country boy nature, as he does in another shot, but there is also a shot of mysterious hands counting hundred dollar bills--a bribe, perhaps, or a fee. In either case the message is, there is lots of money about, and surely the good lawyer Matlock is more than comfortable. Similarly the various images of Jessica Fletcher and Fatman McCabe bear witness to affluent living, although Jessica's affluence is the quiet affluence of a fairly well-off New Englander who plants flowers and fishes in a quiet New England village, while the Fatman's affluence is the more glitzy affluence of the active day and night life of Honolulu. In essence as we look at the title sequences we say to ourselves, if the characters can live in the places shown, and do what they are shown doing, then they must be well-off. Only Chief Bill Gillespie seems to live in modest circumstances. The town he is from seems to be a place the train passes through. It is a modest town, the various town shots show, and we infer that as a leader of policemen, he probably lives better than most in the town, but he is surely not wealthy in the way Jessica Fletcher or Ben Matlock or Jason McCabe are.

Fourth, the elderly characters are always healthy and physically and socially active. There are no signs of poor health, only active robust people. In The Golden Girls we see all the women together frequently, jumping up, touching, singing. Ben Matlock is in court standing up, waving his arms, or walking outside, reporters hounding him, or shaking hands with an associate and smiling. Jessica rides a bicycle, jogs, fishes, waves at people, investigates, writes. Jason is out in the city walking and looking around. Bill Gillespie is not shown in any active images, but

police cars roam about the streets of his town, shot after shot, and we imagine that activities such as this must be his activities.

Where physical activity is present mental activity usually follows, and this is certainly the case for the characters presented. Fifth, then, the elderly are portrayed as mentally active, indeed quick-witted. Jessica's act of composition is a fine example of this. And the genre she works in, the mystery, has always been a genre for the mentally active and smart. Besides being a writer, she is also an amateur sleuth, and the title sequence of Murder, She Wrote in a number of night time shots invites us to watch her looking for clues. Interactions among the Golden Girls, a nudge, a look, a reaction, suggest lively intercourse and good humor, all indicators of quick-wittedness. The Fatman, as we have said, always seems to be observing; Matlock is listening to a witness or turning a green blackboard to display a diagram and make a point; Bill Gillespie is a policeman. The very natures of the jobs of most of the elderly characters and their normal activities displayed in numerous shots all suggest that the characters not only are mentally alert, but they are also especially quick-witted.

Sixth, the elderly characters are looked up to and admired. There is a comical shot in Jake and the Fatman where the Fatman looks down at his old pet bulldog, Max, who has a lei around his neck. The shot accents the similarity of the Fatman to his dog, both in size and nature, but it also shows the dog looking up to its owner. Appropriate looking up to is a measure of relationships in most of the shows. Clearly Jake looks up to the Fatman as a kind of fatherly boss. The same holds for Matlock's staff, his female investigating attorney and his black male investigator. The press also follow Matlock, and witnesses and the public in the court room constantly eye him, as does the female district attorney who opposes him as well toasts him, in separate shots. In The Golden Girls the various group shots speak of friendship and group admiration; friends may get a little fed up with friends, but they look up to them, and the same holds for mother and daughter, Sophia and Dorothy. Looking up to in In the Heat of the Night can only be inferred from the image of the chief and his coming first. Murder, She Wrote has no obvious internal means of conveying admiration, but its subtle juxtaposition of irised memory scenes and "present" typing scenes suggests the writer's admiration of memory, the stuff of writing, in an important practical sense, and the activities and the presented self remembered become the admired.

There is another kind of admiration that operates, in addition, the admiration that we, the audience, are encouraged to offer to the characters. The title sequence of

Murder, She Wrote, for example, more clearly than the other title sequences, asks us, the viewers, to admire the character presented to us, since we are actively positioned as the other, there being no other other on the screen. In effect, Jessica demands our admiration. A fine symbol of expected audience admiration can be found in Jake and the Fatman. The title sequence opens up with bubble shots of first Jake and then the Fatman, positioned in the middle of surrounding Hawaiian landscape. When the Fatman appears, the surrounding scenery has the feel of mountains behind, and when the Fatman juts his jaw forward, one gets the sense of witnessing a sculpture on Mount Rushmore or the face of an important historical personage on a coin. A similar look and movement of the jaw is found in the last two shot with Jake that closes the title sequence. In a subtle way, then, the audience is invited to watch an admired living ikon perform.

Seventh, elderly characters are seen as sexy but not sensual. Admiration is partly measured in sexiness, and this holds true in Matlock, especially, and in a smaller measure in Jake and the Fatman. Matlock is found in the presence of two pretty, and clearly much younger, women who both look at him with eyes that suggest desire as well as admiration. Each woman--Michelle Thomas, played by Nancy Stafford and Julie March, played by Julie Sommars--is found in a number of shots with Ben, and in one shot he holds Michelle's hand as he leads her down the court steps and in another he toasts Julie with a glass of wine. There is nothing aggressive or sensual about Matlock's behavior, however. If anything, he is romantic and gentlemanly--and capable of attracting at least two pretty younger women. A slightly different kind of sexuality is displayed in the Jake and the Fatman title sequence, but the result, I believe, is similar. The Fatman, himself, is never shown directly with women. He is either alone or with Jake. In the other shots, however, Jake is displayed in muscle shirts, by the shore, in a car with a beautiful woman; there are shots of hula girls, a stripper, night clubs, the beach, swimming pools . . . in short, the activities of sensual day and night Honolulu, shot after shot, and all these images create a sensual ambience that Jake certainly is a part of and only touches the Fatman insofar as he touches Jake. Our sense then is that Jake rubs off on the Fatman--he is sexy, by association, but not sensual. Sex is not an issue in the other title sequences. A sidenote, however, is worth interjecting: when Jessica's sexuality is treated in Murder, She Wrote episodes, it is treated in an even more refined Matlock manner--she is a desirable friend and companion. In episodes of The Golden Girls sensuality is common, but most often it is presented as a kind of raunchy adolescent

sensuality. Finally, to my knowledge, sensuality is rarely an issue in the personal life of Chief Gillespie.

The eighth and last generalization flows in essence from all the rest: what can be called the old order generally rules in all of the shows. Removed from the mythic centers of the problemmatic in modern life, cities like Chicago, Los Angeles, or New York, what the title sequences present is the old South of Atlanta in Matlock, with its assurances of fair play and justice, and the old South again in Sparta, Mississippi in In the Heat of the Night, where some of Virgil Tibbs' North has reared its presence, but the police are still "literally" (as the blue police images suggest) on top of things. In The Golden Girls we see the new South in Miami, but it is the romantic retirement Miami, the orange morning or evening of the opening airplane shot or the sparkling sunlit buildings, blue sky, and clear water of the shot that follows, not the drug world of Miami Vice. We see old New England in Murder, She Wrote, with its sense of individualism and bounded stories. Only in the title sequence of Jake and the Fatman do we meet images of the problemmatic--the sizzling scene, so-to-speak--but these are countered by the tourist motif of the Fatman walking around alone, or walking the streets with Jake enjoying the fun of Honolulu, images asserting that the show's territory is safe because the great bulldog is watching, and he can always set Jake into protective motion.

In short, the title sequences assert: crime is contained; there is excitement and pleasure to be had, but within a background of civility; women can venture forth and be "heroes," but the essential values of the old patriarchy hold.

Changing Stereotypes

What can we say has changed then in the last ten years? Have we in fact reached a new Golden Age on prime time television where the elderly are presented as they should be?

If we recall what was said in the review of critical literature presented earlier in this paper, I think we can say that this study upholds the notion that elderly characters have become more prominant on prime time television and that positive elderly characters most certainly have drawn significant audiences to those shows that feature them, especially older audiences. In addition, each of the shows studied has withstood, and continues to withstand, a television show's biggest adversary--acceptable ratings over time. Moreover, each of the shows, assuming the title

sequences are adequate indexes, in various ways subverts the earlier stereotypes of the elderly, and each presents each elderly character as a respected person.

Elderly women appear to presented a little better than they used to be, but their presentations are still troubled. Women are clearly featured in three of the shows, although they have only subsidiary roles in In the Heat of the Night and Jake and the Fatman, traditional action cop shows. Where women dominate, in the two female shows, The Golden Girls and Murder, She Wrote, they are seen as commanding and powerful, yet essentially they are also viewed as separate from men. Where they work in conjunction with men, in Matlock and perhaps in In the Heat of the Night, they are seen as secondary. Finally, in Jake and the Fatman women are viewed as the traditional accoutrements of the male and the male gaze. Two universes, thus, seem to be depicted--a female universe of older women where there are no men, and a male universe of older men where there are women but no older women. We can conclude that women seem better treated than they have been, but when men appear with women, the old stereotypes of male prominence and power still operate. We can also conclude that prime time television doesn't seem to know how (or wish) to handle a continuing intimate relationship between two elderly people of the opposite sex.

The stereotype of the elderly being extremely healthy and active physically and socially continues. True, most elderly are fit and active, but most also retire at ages earlier than the elderly characters of the shows studied, and many elderly are not as active or fit as the characters studied. Related to activity and fitness is income, and the continuing stereotype of the well-off elderly is surely more problemmatic than that of the healthy and active elderly, which at least serves as an ideal model for all. Many elderly, especially women, are poor, and the older the elderly are, the more likely they are to be poor. Stressing the elderly affluent in dramatic presentations may satisfy the fantasies of many older or younger viewers, but it hardly presents a responsible picture of American life. In fact, it may undercut positive portrayals of the active, healthy, and social elderly, for surely the three positive attributes are at least partially income related. Without a fairly substantial income who, in truth, could possibly participate in many of the various modeled activities depicted in the title sequences studied? Aren't some viewers likely to feel alienated from the good life, and from some notion of American life as well?

Another way to answer the questions asked at the beginning of this section is to follow the deconstructive route and ask what do the title sequences show in their attempts to conceal, and what do they actually leave out?

Family in the blood sense is almost totally left out. Only Dorothy and Sophia are blood family. Here, of course, we go beyond the title sequences because if we read them alone, we have to assume that each defines a family in its cast of characters. Indeed, for the most part, this is exactly what family means in most of the shows, for each show's working family is the featured family in the show. Even Murder, She Wrote has a kind of working family like the rest of the shows, not the people identified in the credit shots who constitute a living or working together family, as in the other title sequences, but a family of images that constitute a kind of story family. More and more Americans are certainly living within created families, groups at work or social groups, for example, but most Americans, the elderly included, still live, struggle, and enjoy a blood family context, a context that is missing from the shows studied.

Crime and other common troubles of the social structure are not left out, but they are cleverly submerged. Even in The Golden Girls there is a shot of the four women at night huddling together passing through a room where a picture on the wall is askew, suggesting they are fearful of a robber. But the shot passes by quickly amid so many other happy shots. . . and theirs is a comedy show. All the other shows are directly involved with crime, yet one finishes the title sequences feeling secure--because there are enough police, as in In the Heat of the Night, or justice reigns, as in Matlock. In Jake and the Fatman if there are problems, surely Jake or the Fatman will protect us. The point here is that the title sequences say that we are safe, that the old mythic order will prevail, and the fact that the title sequences continue to do this year after year both stretches and compounds this illusion.

How well then does television serve older people here in 1991? Passably, in some ways. Reverse positive stereotypes seem to be prominent, the other side of earlier negative stereotypes, an improvement of sorts. The older are featured a little more, an improvement. Women are being treated a little better, another improvement. But in other ways, not so passably. The patriarchy and the rich still hold sway, along with the mythic old--significant problems. And even more problemmatic-- much of America's present real still continues to cry out in its absence.

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